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NEEDED - A THIRD FORCE

by J.M. Houston

Our modern age emphasises existence more than belief. It is concerned with the relevance of "things" rather than with philosophical or theological debates about truth. That is to say, pragmatic rather than metaphysical viewpoints are being emphasized. The consistency of such materialism shows up in bold relief the inconsistencies of those who dwell in two worlds. Faced by this contemporary mood, church life has become deeply suspect for a great proportion of our population. New trends of thought would seek to form a new faith from the best of many religious systems, or even to establish new "scientific" institutes for the understanding of altruism and peace. Implicit is the feeling that Christianity has failed; after two millenia of experimentation something else should take its place, in a post-Christian era. Christians, too, are deeply perturbed by the nonentity, complacency and blatant inconsistencies of much modern church life. Their dilemma is expressed in the following confession: "Christianity has no meaning for me whatsoever apart from the church, but I sometimes feel as though the church as it actually exists is the source of all my doubts and difficulties". - (J.M.Oldham, Life is Commitment).

With this background, we tend to form two distinct groups. One group consists of the community of the righteous who claim even to vindicate God by the fruits of their righteousness. Smugly satisfied with the status quo, they have "arrived" - a disastrous event in personal and deadening in corporate experience. They are Churchmen rather than Life Christians. Another group, often deeply dissatisfied and personally reactionary against this state of affairs, give up their role in the activities of the local church. Inter-denominational work seems a more effective and attractive sphere of service. It is significant that so rapidly has inter-denominational activity developed in the last few decades that it now represents about 40 per cent of all Christian missionary effort. A third and more recent outlook is beginning to recognize that inter-denominational activity can be just as denominationally minded, and suffering from the same bane of professionalism as the churches. Selecting its particular sphere of service, its specialized activity is its most effective and yet its weakest element. It can only be an incomplete form of service that needs to be complemented by the activities of a local church. For it is only the local church that presents the truly Christian challenge of the "I and my neighbour" relationship, with all the diversity of such social relations and obligations. Through local churches, the advance of Primitive Christianity was made possible, and we believe must still be made. A reformation movement within Christendom is needed today, as vitally as it was in the sixteenth century. Indeed, never since the first century A.D. has Christianity been in more peril.

If such a third force is needed to work from within our local churches, then at first sight the Brethren Movement appears to be placed advantageously. There is a marked trend everywhere to recognize the role that can be played by the laity to emphasize personal responsibility in a deepened church life, and to recognize the unity among all Christians. But the established churches that now advocate these very features, including the Roman Church, will find themselves in doctrinal difficulties. Where are the limits to be drawn between

(iii) The Scriptures make it clear that the fellowship of all saints is essential. Without it, we cannot understand the mystery of the Incarnation (Eph. 3:17,18), and without "all saints" we shall not come unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ". (Eph. 4:13). "It is a vain thing for Christian individuals or groups to imagine they can better attain to the fulness of spiritual maturity, if they isolate themselves from their fellow believers". (F.F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Ephesians, p.68). By such a fellowship, God used the word of Isaiah and the exposition of Philip to illuminate the understanding of the Ethiopian Eunuch. In a late day, Wm. Law's A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, was to challenge John Wesley and, through him, all England. And so as we re-read the writings of the past and share the convictions of our contemporaries, we experience the same deepening and understanding of Christ.

2. A Local Church is a Community of Sincere Believers:

- (i) We accept the Bible as our authority in all matters of faith and conduct. Yet many of our local churches are in grave danger today of becoming biblically illiterate. How many of our assemblies have serious Bible lectures, involving a sustained, systematic ministry by able teachers? Instead, we are tranquillized by pep talks, confused by disjointed addresses and afflicted with low standards of delivery. As we enjoy little serious theology, we now find that the congregation of a well-taught minister is often much better instructed. Moreover, we are often at a loss to know how to make full use of the gifts of a well-taught brother. This is surely a reversal of the early days of the Brethren Movement. Indeed, any effort to promote serious and systematic Bible Study is actually opposed by some Brethren, perhaps as a defence against their own ignorance.
- (ii) As so-called "fundamentalists", a term only coined at the beginning of this century, we, in common with others who have a highly systematic theology, tend to have a very superficial and flat view of the Scriptures. Like a character's interpretation of the book of Revelation, "instead of being the abyss of God's counsel with its dim outlines and broad shadows, it is ... a flat sunny plain, laid out with straight, macadamized roads". (J.H.Newman, Loss and Gain). The traveller on such a highway associates our Movement with three serious errors:
 - a) we become identified in the minds of other Christians with a fantastic use of imagination in our emphasis on typology. This is a good servant but a bad master of Biblical exegesis. Its emphasis puts a premium on credulity. Those who use it most amongst us, seem to know least about its principles of usage.
 - b) There is a tendency to equate certain private - and they can only be private - interpretations of prophecy with the authority of Scripture. This undermines rather than sustains

clergy and laity, and why? Are churches communities of believers, or audiences from whom Christians can be made by the rites of the Church? Is the organization of churches within a common bureaucracy the same thing as the unity we have in Christ? Indeed, to what Scriptures and to what Christ are we obedient? We may purr gently as we see these dialectical dilemmas facing other denominations.

But there is a very real danger that some of us may think that all we need is to disassociate from the ill-repute of Exclusive Brethren and their tendencies, to raise our standards of the ministry of the Word, to be more efficient in the manner we handle our affairs generally, and to stop there. By all means let us clearly distinguish between our principles of church life and the undesirable practices that have been allowed to creep in. But if we clarify our Christian principles, we shall find each one of us involved in the major task of our personal lives. And whatever opposition we face from misguided brethren, we shall win not by argument but by ethics; by the insistence of a personal, practical Christianity that is loving and humble. We must respect all our brethren deeply for Christ has loved them infinitely. We dare not show any bitterness nor assert ourselves, for we have all been "be-graced in the Beloved". (Eph. 1:6.)

Without hesitancy all true Christians accept the following basic principles of local church life. But their practical implications are so immense that very few ever seriously practise them. As our Lord challenged the Pharisees of His day refuting the rottenness of their outward observances and legality so He speaks to us today. Continually, we tend to substitute convenient practices for vital principles and thereby fail to practise our principles. In doing so, we become a self-perpetuating organization that finds divine sanction in what we are ... a dangerous, if not blasphemous situation. If the goal of the church is for itself and not for Christ alone, then it ceased to be Christian.

1. A Local Church is the Reflection of the Church Universal:

- (i) This must imply that we have a genuine and practical fellowship with all other Christians. We can debar no-one from the sacraments, who is known as a committed Christian. Many of us practise this at the Lord's Supper, but why do we not project this into other forms of our church life? Is it consistent that we should use the writings of devout Evangelicals and yet deprive ourselves of the privilege of using such men on our own platforms? The argument that some of them might refuse to accept such an invitation, and that the matter is therefore an academic problem is not valid. The onus of such a refusal would rest with them and not on us.
- (ii) Behind our fears of being "too open", we must face this challenge. What are the deeper instincts within us? -
 - a) the fear of man or the fear of God:
 - b) the preservation of our own denominational identity or the single desire to serve Christ:
 - c) the pride of our own way of doing things, or the acceptance of the guidance of the Holy Spirit whose freedom surmounts all the obstacles of race, nation, society and localisms?

the Word of Truth. Certain vocal brethren have caused the "Brethren Movement" to be identified with distinctive school of prophecy. This is of course, equally true of certain inter-denominational groups especially in North America. It is everywhere tragic however if a premium is placed on prophetic interpretation rather than on Christian ethics. Because prophetic subjects may be controversial, to remain silent may be to suffer loss, so frank utterance is surely to be welcomed. But bitter controversy, dogmatism that is psychological and the exclusion of a speaker from a platform because of his views, are surely to be deplored.

- c) The century-old fashion to promote dispensationalism may provide convenient pigeon-holes for our interpretation of Scripture. But it is to be deplored when this emphasis makes the Sermon on the Mount irrelevant for Christians. The tendency of some dispensationalists to indulge in metaphysics rather than in ethics is surely false. Although dispensationalism is not necessarily a cause in the decline of personal ethics, we should reconsider the charges of antinomianism that have been made against us. (e.g. D. Steels, Antinomianism Revived; or the theology of the so-called "Plymouth Brethren" examined and refuted, 1887).
- (iii) Along with other evangelicals today, our insistence upon belief has often emphasized the importance of mental assent with the absence of genuine repentance. In consequence, new birth means very little in the practical life of many Christians. We live like Charlie Chaplin from Monday to Saturday, and St. Francis of Assisi on Sunday. Basically, our instincts, ambitions, our quest for organization, our time-table and possessions remain secularized. This spurious doctrine of "Believism" is a cheap grace that is a disgrace to the Cross of Christ. Did Christ die so cruelly and utterly that we might only have a ready-made insurance policy for the after-life and an enjoyable compromise with the contemporary world? We need very seriously to re-examine our concepts of the theology of grace. (see D. Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship). The frank self-criticism amongst us in the last two decades does encourage us to hope that a forward movement has already commenced.

3. A Local Church is a Community of Contrite Reformers:

If we live consciously under the scrutiny of the "I am that I am", we shall realise the personal and continuous claims of His Word upon us. Every generation of believers needs reform, and the process is individual and continuous throughout life.

- (i) Nevertheless, the denominations tend to be relics of historic revivals, where they stick fast. We need, in our Movement, to heed the warning given by John Robinson as he bade farewell to the Puritans on their embarkation for the "New World" of 1620. - "Brethren ... I charge you before God ... that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of His,

be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry; for I am verily persuaded the Lord has more truth to break forth out of His Holy Word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of the Reformed Churches, who are come to a period (i.e. full stop) in religion and will go at present no further than the instruments of their Reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His Will our God has revealed to Calvin they will die rather than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see are stuck fast where they were left by that great man of God who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented ... were they now living they would be as willing to receive further light as that which they first received". D. Neal, The History of the Puritans, II p.12). We are familiar with other names to insert alongside those of Luther and Calvin.

- (ii) The process of reformation is unsettling. Where will it all lead? What will be the consequences? Caution would suggest we continue as before, at least assured of the past, with its tangible results. This attitude betrays the tacit assumption that while "we walk by faith" as individual Christians, we walk by sight as local churches. Many of the Anabaptists were fiercely persecuted in the sixteenth century by both Lutherans and Calvinists, because apparently they carried the Reformation too far. Perhaps we should investigate the reasons.
- (iii) Idealism and frankness are two essential requisites of the reforming spirit. Youth is the age of idealism and great men of God have been those who most successfully grew up in their ideals. How close do our elders in the assemblies keep in touch sympathetically with the ideals of their young people? If our ideals do not transform us, then we destroy them in rationalism and compromise. Frankness (including self-criticism) is essential to Christian maturity. Yet the Protestant churches have failed signally to recognise the enormous potential in the act of confession. "Confess your sins one to another" has been a disobeyed injunction, because of our fear of the abuses others, such as the Roman Church and the Moral Re-Armament Movement, have made of the confessional. Confession is not something that we can organize into a technique. But used in personal, individual relationship, its genuine practice amongst us would deepen our concept of grace, strengthen our ethical practices and help to remove many of the disruptive tendencies of local church fellowship. It can be a God-given therapy, when used sincerely and humbly, in the recognition of Christ's saving grace. As confession calls for utmost secrecy, it may be more general than the writer thinks it is. We can only ask ourselves personally, "am I so close to Christ and His interests that I share the secret problems of many in need of His grace?"

4. The Local Church is a Community of Redeemed Persons Gathered Only to the Person of Christ:

The Brethren Movement more than most denominations has stripped away many of the conventional trappings of much institutionalism. This helps to emphasize that Christianity is a way of living, a total involvement of

one's personality. Along with other evangelicals, we are gravely challenged by two vital matters, however, in the realm of personality.

- (i) A remarkable revolution in psychological thought is in progress and many theologians are unaware of it. Psycho-analysis has failed and a crisis, of what are the moral values, faces psychiatry. It is sadly ironical that when liberal theologians in a desperate attempt to clothe themselves in modernity, betray the Gospel, many psychologists should be using such symbols as original sin, the uniqueness of man, the need of redemption and new birth. But the evangelical is faced today by a vital challenge in this realm. Do we really believe that Christ solves all our personal problems? If so, why do we not take the time and trouble to enter deeply into the personal problems of our neighbours and brethren? Is it possible that the preacher who says on Sunday that Christ solves all our personal needs, and then himself consults a secular psychiatrist on Monday morning, is betraying Christianity disastrously? The increasing neurosis of this atomic age, may take more toll of human life and happiness than the bomb. If we confess as Christians we can do nothing for the spiritually distressed, then the world will recognize that Christianity has wholly failed in this generation. We cannot all be amateurs in psycho-therapy, but we must do something drastically and immediately about it. The "souls" we pray for in our prayer-meetings are clamouring for our help in the psychic needs of our age. Our greatest opportunity and challenge today, is to preach the Gospel of the integration of the whole personality in Christ, and to demonstrate in our own lives its efficacy. If we do not, then there are already signs of "a chemical Christianity", that may become perhaps the most formidable anti-Christ of all time. Some of us are becoming increasingly convinced that personal work is far more effective than the endless time-table of meetings.
- (ii) Mass-mindedness is the mark of our urbanised society, a tendency which will increase with the explosive growth of world population and city life. Its effects on Christianity today are baneful and numerous. In the history of the Church there has been constant confusion between the validity of the collective creed and the individual faith. Emphasis on the former has always tended to destroy the personal responsibility and so to degenerate into conventional morality. Such adherence to a creed is often only a social convention of family upbringing and identity with a community. The social stratification of much church life, and the exodus of churches to the suburbs reflect this feature, though Christian contact with the world's leaders, usually suburbanites, is to be welcome. Moreover, the modern trends of mass organization, the cult of stardom and the superficial, personal convictions, all indicate how secularized the average Christian has become. Mass evangelism - for whose genuine results we can thank God - is not the evidence of a vital reformation of the Church - but the tragic reflection on the lack of personal witness among Christians. Indeed, stunt efforts introduced into some forms of modern evangelism are as worldly as any other malpractice of the Church.

5. The Local Church is a Community of Worshippers and Witnesses:

The two sacraments of the Church, The Lord's Supper and Baptism, involve a personal response within a collective experience, and seek to balance belief with action. There is moreover, the recognition of the interdependence of worship and witness. We make much of our worship but how vital and real is our witness? In two realms we need to think much more realistically:

- (i) Our prayer meetings are very often a substitute for action. And it is far easier to win public applause with "amens" to pious sentiment than to win Christ's approval for sacrificial service.
- (ii) Our missionary enterprise overseas tends to become the substitute for ineffective evangelism at home. In the glamour to evangelize the two per cent of the world's population that have no Scriptures, we have forgotten the lost frontier of the city, in which more than half the world's population will live during our generation. Our missionary outlook and strategy need fundamental changes in **numerous** directions.

In the light of much apathy, inanity, mediocrity, worldliness and exclusivism in our assemblies today, we may ask despairingly, "What can we do?" Social history reveals that real changes are made by individuals, not by a society. We are not in the grip of vast, social forces about which we can do nothing. It is as individuals when we face up to the moral issues of self-centredness and the psychological inhibitions of fears that we can begin to make reforms corporately, in a spirit of love. Only when a church talks of failure and accepts it, has it failed indeed. But it is not enough to expend our money on new halls, to be open to changes commensurate with modern times, to raise the standards of a Biblical ministry, and generally handle our church affairs more competently. Primarily, our dominant desire should only be to live more like Christ. Today we face three alternatives: we can maintain the status quo in our assemblies, not seeing and not desiring any reforms; or we may allow ourselves to become so discouraged that we leave the Brethren Movement to serve in other spheres that we think will be more effective; or we can be determined by God's help to remain where we are and seek by personal realism and truly sacrificial service to help in reviving and establishing local churches that they may be effective in witness and worship.

Examination of the lives of great men of God who have served Him in their generation, reveals their personal hunger after God, their deep unrest for a more consistent, Christ-like life. All Christians today need, as never before, to hear the call to personal discipleship to live and to act in the light of a personal experience of our Lord, and to walk under the constant gaze of the contemporary Christ. For according to the measure of personal conviction of the indwelling presence of Christ, so will be the evident expression of our Christianity. To paraphrase Paul's experience, we have to ask ourselves, "Have I not been sent to serve Christ? Am I not free from all personal ambition, covetousness, the fear of man, indeed all the self-life? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?" (1 Cor.9:1.)
